Written by Mike Schulz
Wednesday, 30 January 2008 02:34

Though a familiar television presence through such series as The Practice, The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, *and* Star Trek: Deep Space Nine - *in which the actor played the Cardassian Broca in the program's final two episodes - Mel Johnson Jr. is primarily a stage actor, with more than 30 years of professional credits on Broadway, off-Broadway, and in regional theatres and touring productions across America; most recently, he portrayed Hoke Colburn in an acclaimed presentation for Hartford TheatreWorks of* Driving Miss Daisy *(which the* New York Times *called "a splendid 20th-anniversary revival").*

On Broadway, Johnson has worked with the likes of Kevin Kline and Madeline Kahn (in On the Twentieth Century *); Gregory Hines (* Eubie! *); Chita Rivera, Liza Minnelli, and Jason Alexander (* The Rink, *by the legendary composing team of John Kander & Fred Ebb); and Bob Fosse (* Big Deal *); and he spent several months as Mufasa in Julie Taymor's* The Lion King *. He is also a veteran of a personal favorite television series - David Lynch's eccentric sitcom* On the Air *, a behind-the-scenes spoof of live TV that ran for three whole episodes in 1992 - and here, Johnson reflects on a few notable career highs.*

On his beginnings in musical theatre

My first professional work, when I got out of school, was in children's theatre. But then it was just major regional theatre, like the Actors Theatre of Louisville - just going around and doing *pl ays*
. But then, being a native New Yorker, I took a step back and said, 'Well, what are black actors *doing*
in New York City? Singing and dancing.'

Now I could always sing, but I never took it as a means of, you know, bringing home the bacon. So I auditioned for my first off-Broadway show, and it was a musical, and I got it, and then - all of a sudden - everyone thought of me as primarily a musical person. And I loved it. It was a wonderful way of staying in New York. I would call myself, then, an actor who sings and *moves* well.

On *The Rink*

I was actually friends with John Kander; we just sort of knew each other socially, and his good buddy was my voice teacher. And we all thought this [*The Rink*] was going to be the be-all and end-all.

It was originally going to be a little off-Broadway show written for Chita Rivera, and when Liza - who's a really good friend of Chita's - found out about the show, she said to her, 'I'd really love to play your daughter.' So once *that* happened, it became a Broadway show. And it was great. I'm still very close with Chita and Liza - they both came to see
Hot Feet
, the last thing I did [on Broadway] - and Jason Alexander and I are really good buddies. In fact, I directed

his
one-man show [a Los Angeles production of
Give 'Em Hell Harry
], which was a wonderful experience. I
really
enjoyed that show.

On *The Lion King*

When it was first conceived, I was doing *Jelly's Last Jam* on the road, and Disney had just started doing shows on Broadway - and, you know, everybody was saying, "Oh, Disney's
taking over
Broadway!" I agreed to go see it because two friends were in it, and I sat there with my arms crossed. You know, "I don't want to
see
this show ... !"

And then when it started, I mean, my *jaw* dropped. When the animals came down the aisle, tears came out of my eyes, and I just said, "I've got to play Mufasa one of these days." And when I was living in California, I just told my agents, you know, to organize an audition, and boom - about three or four months later they called me, and they asked me to take over on Broadway for a while. It was just great. All bells and whistles. Just great.

On *On the Air*

When I auditioned - well, *met* with David Lynch, because he didn't ask me to audition - I went in and talked with him for, like, 20 minutes, half an hour. We just sat down and we started talking. And I was involved in this organization called the Imagination Workshop in Los Angeles, which

was a group of writers, actors, and directors who worked within the psychiatric community, improving self-esteem. And the Log Lady [from Lynch's *Twin Peaks*], her husband was in that group, and so when he [Lynch] found *that* out, he said, "Oh, *yes* ! She talked about that organization!" And then he asked me, "Can you cry on screen?" And I said, "Yeah!" And by the time I got home, he had called, and I had got this job.

And it was wonderful. It was really the first time they used single-camera film for a half-hour comedy, so it was shot like a little movie. And David was *fascinating*, but that show was so far ahead of its time. I mean, we had talking *animals* , the director [character] didn't speak in a language that anybody could *understand* ... . It was *wild.* I said to myself, "This thing is *not* gonna fly." I mean, come *on* ! We shot seven or eight of them, and they aired three, and against the *Olympics* ... !